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The Usage Game: Catering to Perverts

Geoffrey K. Pullum

Introduction

You might well think that sensible grownups would want their usage guidance books to treat them like grownups, and provide them with authoritative information about Standard English usage. But that does not appear to be what they really want, as plenty of evidence shows.

When people look for a book about gardening they expect factual information based on up-to-date botanical and horticultural science (how and when to prune hydrangea of what type, and what the consequences will be, and so on), along with descriptions that accord with what one actually finds empirically when one tries to make plants grow. The market for books on grammatical usage and style suggests things are very different indeed.

The books on usage that succeed best do a lot of finger-wagging and bossing around. They are written as if for people who want to be dominated, humiliated, and punished—as if they lust for someone to force them into unnatural but posh-sounding constructions, as if they want to be harshly disciplined for fantasized grammatical transgressions. In short, it looks as if the usage game is catering to perverts.

Ben Yagoda noted in a post on *Lingua Franca* (a blog on language and writing in academia published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*) that a short piece he published in *The Week* under the title “7 Grammar Rules You Really Should Pay Attention To” received 677 comments and 20,000 Facebook shares; yet the companion piece called “7 Bogus Grammar ‘Errors’ You Don’t Need to Worry About” was almost totally ignored. His suggested reason was that “you can get a lot more attention telling people what to worry about than what not to worry about.” In other words, people are more excited by pain and threat than by comfort and reassurance.

In one of my own posts on *Lingua Franca*, addressing the spellings *cow’s milk* and *cows’ milk*, I put it this way:

Everybody seems to want the answers to grammar dilemmas to be resolved in black and white, not shades of grey. They want a single correct form for each meaning, not choices for users to make according to taste...[I]f you are anything like most of the public you will feel cheated: I haven’t sternly ruled that that one is the right form and the other is wrong. You want discipline.

Sure enough, commenters worried about what meaning difference there could be between *cow’s milk* and *cows’ milk* (is the milk claimed to have come from just one cow?) that would make just one of them correct in any given context, and the others wrong.

Opposed insanities

There are two diametrically opposed crazy positions that I wish were not so easy to illustrate from current discourse about grammar:

- The **Nothing Is Relevant** (or ‘King Canute’) tendency: Rules are rules, traditions must be respected, the common herd don’t have any right to tamper with them. What’s right is right, regardless of how many people fail to comply.
- The **Everything Is Correct** (or ‘anything goes’) tendency: The common people are the arbiters of what’s right, ordinary speakers should control the means of utterance production. Anything anyone says or does under conditions of natural human freedom is *ipso facto* okay.

I call both positions crazy in the sense that no sensible linguist endorses either of them. (I am not suggesting that the people holding them are mentally ill. They may just be obedient: often we believe what we have been taught even when it makes no sense.)

The Nothing Is Relevant view is crazy because there **must** be some connection between what the rules of English grammar say and what behaviours and judgments are typically manifested by the speakers of English, because otherwise we cannot make out a sense in which it is reasonable to say that they are the rules of English. The rules are supposed to make precise **what it means to speak like the recognized speakers of English**. To say that nothing that English speakers say or write is relevant to deciding how the rules should be formulated is irrational.

But the Everything Is Correct view is also irrational, because we know that native speakers do make mistakes. No matter how many people may say *It’s on the...umm...the sideboard*, it remains true that **the umm the sideboard* is not an English noun phrase (henceforth, NP). So the **Everything is Correct** position is just as unacceptable.

Correctness conditions

It is, or ought to be, uncontroversial that human languages have **correctness conditions**: constraints that must be satisfied by an expression in order for it to be properly formed. This holds not just for languages with political standing and an established literature, but also for non-standard dialects in contact with them, and undescribed tribal languages of preliterate peoples whose correctness conditions we do not yet know.

These conditions are to be **discovered**, not stipulated. They are **constitutive** of the language, not regulative: they do not impose restrictions on how it should be used, they define it.

Consider an informal statement of a well-confirmed correctness condition for English, and an illustration of some facts it accounts for:

In an independent declarative clause beginning with a preposed negative adjunct the tensed auxiliary precedes the subject.

Never before had I seen such things.

**Never before I had seen such things.*

At no time did he leave the room.

**At no time he left the room.*

The claim the condition makes is not that speakers of English **ought** to position subjects thus; the claim is that (unless something weird is going on) they **do**. That is normative in the sense that it says positioning the subject after the auxiliary is correct when a negative adjunct is initial in a declarative clause, but not in the sense of saying anything that anyone ought to do.

Naturally, a statement of the condition can be read as saying that you would be well advised to position them thus if you want to be regarded as using Standard English. But no one is telling you that you **should** speak Standard English. It's not your moral duty to use that particular dialect if you don't want to. Saying that in Standard English it is **correct** to respect some condition does not mean it is good, or preferable, or desirable, or virtuous, or appropriate, or compulsory, or expected of you.

A description of Standard English can therefore be construed as implying a recommendation to use expressions of a certain structure, but that is a derivative construal, and the tacit recommendation is addressed solely to those who would like to be regarded as using Standard English.

Satisfaction of the correctness conditions of a language, by definition, provides justification for the claim that some expression is well-formed in that language, and failure to satisfy them provides justification for the claim that some expression is ill-formed.

But of course the higher-level claim that a certain set of statements captures the **right** correctness conditions for that language. also needs justification. That is of a very different sort: it is comparable to the justification of a theory in empirical science.

The point is that the linguist can be **wrong** about whether some proposed statement of the conditions is accurate—even when that linguist speaks the language natively. I will illustrate this with two examples, the first a brief comment on the position of so-called 'particles' in what Huddleston and Pullum (2002, henceforth *CGEL*) calls **prepositional verbs**, and the second, discussed in more detail, having to do with positioning the focusing adverb *only*.

Positioning particles and direct objects

For example, a linguist might propose that in English the shiftable intransitive preposition phrases often known as 'particles' can either follow or precede direct objects, as we see with *up* in these examples of a prepositional verb construction:

- [1] a. *You can tear the certificate up.*
b. *You can tear up the certificate.*

But that would be a mistake: it is too liberal. The right conditions have slightly more complex content, as we see in this example pair:

- [2] a. *The certificate is invalid; you can rip it up.*
b. **The certificate is invalid; you can rip up it.*

Objects that are pronouns are special: they must always precede the particle, or to put it differently, they are required to be strictly adjacent to the preceding verb.

Positioning the focusing adverb *only*

A grammarian might stipulate (as many have proposed) that focusly *only*, in a sense roughly similar to that of *merely*, must immediately precede the word that is its focus. But this is erroneous in the opposite way: it is too restrictive. What it entails is that the meaning “I want only one battery” cannot be expressed by the sentence *I only want one battery*; that the sentence *I only want to be with you* cannot mean “You are the unique person I want to be with”; and so on.

Many people insist that this is indeed a rule of English. Many writing tutors mark it as an error to have *only* come before the verb when its focus is something after the verb. But they appear never to have examined respectable literary works to see whether the claims entailed by the rule are accurate.

The right correctness condition says something more like this:

- [2] Informal and approximate correctness condition on focusing adverb *only*:

Only occurs either prefixed to the minimal constituent expressing its focus, or to some larger subclausal constituent containing the focus, up to and including the minimal predicate VP containing it.

This is the condition that we find is supported when we examine literary works commonly thought of as prime examples of excellent writing. When we search in a corpus of English for uses of *only*, we find that the overwhelmingly most common use of the word is as an adjectival modifier, as in *our only daughter* or *the only way to behave to a woman*; but it is easy to find cases like the following, in which I have underlined *only* and the constituent that is obviously intended as its focus:

From *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde:

I have only been married once. (Meaning: “I have been married just once and no more than that.”)

Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. (Meaning: “Women do that solely under the condition that they have called each other a lot of other things first.”)

I only met you today for the first time. (Meaning: “I met you today for the first time, not on any earlier occasion.”)

From *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad:

I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. (Meaning: “I was to find out only when several further months had passed...”)

They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means.
(Meaning: “They can see only the mere show...”)

But the warning could not have been meant for the place where it could be only found after approach. (Meaning: “...could be found only after approach”)

I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel....
(Meaning: “...could hear only the heavy splashing thump...”)

I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. (Meaning: “...of which I became aware only when...”)

They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts... (Meaning: “They showed only that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint...”)

From *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

I’ve only been here an hour. (Meaning: “I’ve been here only an hour”)

“It was in nineteen-nineteen, I only stayed five months. (Meaning: “...I stayed only five months”)

“She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me.” (Meaning: “She married you only because I was poor...”)

...afterward he could only say that he hadn’t thought anything much about them. (Meaning: “he could say only that he hadn’t thought...”)

These are from the first three works I picked at random from my small library of searchable classic texts. The point is not that after diligent search one can find literary works that violate the simplistic rule; the point is that in any arbitrary text you choose you can readily find evidence that the simplistic rule does not comport with the way English is actually spoken by its native speakers and written by its greatest writers.

So those who criticize other people’s grammar, or issue advice on proper usage, should keep in mind that they too can be in error. It could be the usage critic, the person who is trying to tell others about correctness in English, who has formed the wrong impression or induced the wrong generalization. Their tacit theory of correctness for English might be false, just as a car mechanic might have a false theory of what is wrong with your car, and recommend replacing the wrong part.

The only way to discover figure out whether one is positing an unsound rule is to examine the evidence and be willing to consider that one might be wrong.

Grammar versus style

The principles that define syntactic and morphological permissibility should not be confused with the desiderata for good **style**. Style involves a skilled choices between alternatives that the grammar makes available; languages can be used brilliantly or ploddingly.

One key domain of style choice for Standard English is level of formality. Regulative rules and usage guides covering matters of style (e.g. ‘house style’ guides issued by publishers) make plenty of sense, since it is very natural for (say) a magazine always to hyphenate the same compounds and capitalize the same nouns. But language teachers, writing tutors, books on writing, etc., offer purely discretionary advice about grammar as well as style, with no authority other than their own putative prestige.

When a style guide or writing tutor advises you against some construction, that does not necessarily imply a claim that it is never employed in Standard English prose. Far from it, in fact: the matter of whether to put adjuncts between infinitival *to* and the verb of the infinitival clause (whether to ‘split the infinitive’) would not be worth mentioning unless people often did place adjuncts in that position!

You are being urged to accept regulation or control of your use of the language. This is the hallmark of **prescriptive** rules.

Naturally, I have nothing to say against statements of advice for those who do not write well and would like to write better. They can be very helpful. What I oppose is the teaching of prescriptive rules that are hopelessly silly and easily refuted.

Consumer safety warnings are often ridiculous too, but at least there are genuinely good reasons to comply with them. I once purchased a folding cardboard screen for placing across the inside of windscreen of my car when parking it in (Californian) sunshine so that the steering wheel did not become too hot to touch, and I swear there was a warning on the back saying “Do not drive with screen in place.” A ridiculous rule to give to a sane adult; but at least one thing can be said in its favour: there are very good reasons for obeying it.

There is no comparable good reason to comply with many of the putative rules of English that prescriptivists yammer on about. It is neither harmful nor inadvisable to ignore the putative rules—except in the rather indirect and unsubstantive sense that you may encounter disagreeable people who think otherwise.

Do not think, though, that I oppose the very idea of making recommendations using the language correctly and effectively. Not all prescriptive statements about writing or speaking English are silly. In particular, there are aspects of the form of sentences that are often taken to be grammatical but that I think should be treated as purely a matter of style, and it may be very useful to supply novice writers with advice. Let me give a couple of examples.

Genitive determiners plus integrated relative clauses

Noun phrases that have both a pre-head genitive NP determiner and a post-head integrated relative clause dependent on the same head noun strike me as stylistically inept, especially where the relative clause includes an NP duplicating the reference of the genitive NP:

- (3) a. *I like her dress.*
b. *I like the dress that she’s wearing.*

- c. *?I like her dress that she's wearing.*
- (4) a. *They took my laptop.*
- b. *They took the laptop that I was carrying.*
- c. *?They took my laptop that I was carrying.*

To me, these don't sound like good writing. But it seems implausible that the syntax excludes them. At least, I see is no easy way to frame the grammatical rules so that they are excluded. What seems to be wrong is that both the genitive determiner and the relative clause are trying to restrict the reference to make the NP denote something unique, and they are competing with each other. Either *her dress* or Either *the dress that she's wearing* should have been enough to identify the dress referred to in (4), so either *I like the dress that she's wearing* or *I like her dress* would have done; the author of *?I like her dress that she's wearing* hasn't chosen between them, but appears to be trying to use two ways of doing the same thing.

Yet such sentences are found in perfectly well-constructed prose included in corpora. Brett Reynolds (personal communication) found these in COCA:

- (5) a. *I looked at him, at his face that I'd seen as so frail, and it did not seem now that way at all...*
- b. *Their children that they bear while here are citizens...*
- c. *What they're doing is hiring vendors to do their work that they should be doing.*

I think it is best to say that they are just the sort of thing that a regulative style rule should (at least in my personal opinion) disrecommend.

Dangling modifiers

The famous 'dangling modifier' problem is also best treated as a matter of style rather than syntax, in my view. Examples are frequent, in high-quality edited sources.

While not offering any opinion as to whether Mr Rudd would make a better prime minister than Mr Howard, it is clear that Labor is in the box seat going into the final week of the campaign. [Weekend Australian 17-18 Nov 2007, p.18]

What's the subject of *offering*? It's not clear; presumably the writer.

At home at peace in Lamb House in mid-July, after almost a year abroad, two or three years of steady work lay ahead.

[Sheldon M. Novick, *Henry James: The Mature Master*; quoted in David Leavitt, 'A Beast in the Jungle', *New York Times Book Review*, 23 Dec 2007, p.9]

Who was at home? Not clear; it's presumably the person doing the work.

[Magnet Island] *is as pretty as I remember it from my childhood, when a trip here in the family boat was a welcome reprieve from the stifling Townsville heat. As a teenager, the island held even more allure.* [Sunday Mail, Discover section: 27 Jan 2008]

Who was a teenager? Not clear; presumably the writer.

After sampling e-books, Harlequin's Malle Vallik says, they want their customers to buy them.

[Lynn Neary on the National Public Radio programme Morning Edition, 21 Mar 2008, reporting on publishers offering e-access to books for free]

Who samples e-books? Not very clear; presumably the customers.

I co-parented a beloved boxer dog who, within a week of being asked to write this piece (as if on some cosmic cue), died of a massive heart attack in his apparent prime.

[Utne, quoted in *The New Yorker*, 26 June 2006.]

Who was asked to write this piece? Presumably not the dog!

Despite living in Paris for nearly 20 years my English accent has stubbornly stuck with me.

[Adam Roberts, British Airways *High Life* magazine, April 2014, p.29.]

Who has been living in Paris? Not the accent, exactly; presumably the writer.

I mention these cases as a reminder that there is perfectly sensible advice one could give to a writer about how to write in a way that favours the reader's chances of understanding. Do not imagine that I oppose sensible style advice.

Beware, however: the distinction between informal and formal style in Standard English has often been confused with the distinction between Standard English and nonstandard dialects, or even just different subdialects within Standard English.

Different dialects and subdialects of English generally have at least a few slightly different correctness conditions. This introduces a red herring: the dialects need to be represented as related but differing, and the possibility that looms is that the grammarian will be seen as representing one of them as correct and all the others as incorrect. Consider these examples of a rather subtle dialect difference:

- (6) a. *Have you a pen?* [older BrE]
- b. *Do you have a pen?* [normal AmE]
- c. *Have you got a pen?* [normal BrE]

There are probably still some elderly British speakers of Standard English who find (a) grammatical and normal. No younger speaker or American speaker would. In fact American speakers who hear (c) often respond as if they had heard (b), and answer *Yes, I do* rather than

Yes, I have. It would be ridiculous to suggest that America is wrong, or old people are wrong, or younger speakers are wrong. Nobody is wrong, and nobody is using poor style. The dialects have evolved very slightly different correctness conditions.

What makes this a subtle case is that British and American speakers are generally so well acquainted with each other's dialects that neither (b) nor (c) will fail to be understood on either side of the Atlantic.

Prescriptivism and masochism

Setting aside both sensible style advice and silly prejudice against minor dialect differences, I now turn to straight grammatical prescriptivism. And I want to remind you that here as elsewhere the association between masochism and sadism is quite close. We often find that the small but vocal class of prescriptive ideologues within the anglophone intelligentsia inclined not just toward self-mortification but also toward cruelty to others. They do not merely submit themselves to grammatical domination, they also discipline others on questions of how they ought to write and speak, lambasting the linguistic incorrectnesses and infelicities of those who do not follow the prescription to which their taste inclines them.

They do this, naturally enough, on behalf of the prestige dialect. Part of what prescriptivism is about is denigrating nonstandard dialects; as is well known, prescriptivism about Standard English dates back to a time when speakers of rural English dialects were moving into London and urban parts of south-east England and were vulnerable to negative social judgments based on their dialects.

This seems to ally prescriptivists naturally with political conservatives. Indeed, as Geoffrey Nunberg astutely remarked in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, English grammatical usage “has become a flagship issue for the cultural right: the people who are most vociferous about grammatical correctness tend to be those most dismissive of the political variety.”

But the vociferous defenders of English grammar also have a truly peculiar philosophical position regarding rules, and an extraordinary degree of ignorance of basic grammatical terminology.

The peculiar philosophical view is a kind of platonist realism about rules: the rules are apparently taken to have a reality not reducible to usage.

Louis Menand, a literature professor now at Harvard (and, I believe, relatively liberal in political terms) once grumbled in a book review in *The New Yorker* (6 October 2003) that the grammar section of the book (the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*) had not said anything about a certain rule. We'll look a bit more closely at this rule, because it is interesting and strange. I'll begin by simply giving some examples for you to look at and diagnose for errors, because very few British users of English will find the alleged rule at all familiar. Can you see anything wrong with these sentences?

(7) From Strunk's original version of *The Elements of Style*:

The writer's colleagues ... have greatly helped him in the preparation of his manuscript.

(8) From a column by David Skinner in *The Weekly Standard*:

It may be Bush's utter lack of self-doubt that his detractors hate most about him.

(9) From *The New Yorker*:

We can define El Greco's work by saying that what he did well none did better, and that what he did badly none did worse.

(10) From the Bible:

And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison.

It is Wilson Follett, an American usage book author, who seems to have first stated the bogeyman rule that the above examples violate. Follett said (1966, p.66):

A noun in the possessive case, being functionally an adjective, is seldom a competent antecedent of a pronoun.

I note first the occurrence of “seldom” and the reference to being “a competent antecedent”: these are the sort of subtleties that swiftly disappear as a guarded recommendation in a usage text is translated into a terse don't-ever-do-this in the hands of a writing teacher.

What Follett calls “a noun in the possessive case” would be much better called (as in *CGEL*) a genitive NP. A genitive NP is **not** “functionally an adjective” except under the traditional misdefinition of “adjective” as a constituent of any kind that could be said in some sense to modify a noun. A sensible account of English grammar does not cease to call *Edinburgh* a noun just because we can use it as a Modifier in phrases like *Edinburgh weather*.

Follett is in any case talking about NPs functioning as Determiner rather than a Modifier: they have the -'s suffix of genitive case and serve to introduce an NP in a way that renders it definite (there is not necessarily any hint of possession). But a genitive NP functionally as a Determiner is still an NP. What a priori grounds could there be for such NPs losing their eligibility to serve as antecedents to pronouns?

There are no such grounds. And well-written prose provides evidence that such nouns and noun phrases can and do serve as antecedents. This is as true of Menand's own prose as anyone else's. As Zwicky reports on Language Log (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000030.html>), when he opened Menand's own book *The Metaphysical Club* to see if it respected the rule, he rapidly found examples like these:

(11) a. ...a phrase that became [*the city's name*] for *itself*... (p. 7)

b. [*Dr. Holmes's views on political issues*] therefore tended to be reflexive: *he* took his cues from his own instincts... (p. 7)

- c. [*Emerson's reaction*], when Holmes showed him the essay, is choice... (p. 25)
- d. [*Brown's apotheosis*] marked the final stage in the radicalization of Northern opinion. He became, for many Americans, ... (p. 28)
- e. [*Wendell Holmes's riot control skills*] were not tested. Still he had, at the highest point of prewar contention... (p. 31)
- f. [*Holmes's account of his first wound*] was written, probably two years after the battle in which it occurred, in a diary he kept during the war. (p. 38)

Follett's rule, sharpened up and framed as a general syntactic constraint on pronoun/antecedent relations, is utterly spurious. Yet Americans have elevated it to the status of a hard-and-fast rule that it is an error to violate. Indeed, they cling to it and fight for it as if their culture depended on it. A schoolteacher in Maryland named Kevin Keegan complained to the Educational Testing Service that it had marked a grammar test question on the crucial Scholastic Aptitude Test incorrectly, and high-school students of his who had spotted the genitive antecedent and identified it as an error deserved credit. Instead they had been treated as having got the question wrong. The question was about whether there is a grammar error in this sentence, and if so, where it is:

- (12) *Toni Morrison's genius enables her to create novels that arise from and express the injustices African Americans have endured.*

The test had been marked on the correct assumption that there are no grammar errors in (12).

This issue interested Zwicky enough that he wrote to Menand to ask: why defend a rule that even Menand's own excellent prose showed to be indefensible? In reply, Menand expressed the view that regulative rules of usage "are fundamentally arbitrary, and thus sometimes feel as though they exist only to trip up even the most careful writer." He meant this as a defence of the putative rule: its arbitrariness was one of the properties showing that it did not come naturally, and if attempting to comply with it involved a certain amount of pain (or at least, taking pains), that was just what such rules are supposed to put us through.

Perhaps you can see why I associate this with the masochistic impulse. It is as if some people want there to be rules that they do not obey, so that they will be called upon for discipline, and if they fail to yield to it, will deserve punishment. (And often they will display a sadistic side too, condemning others to similar punishment.)

Menand is by no means alone in his attitude. It is widespread. A colleague of Zwicky's posted a remark to a newsgroup (psy.lang) to the effect that violations of a certain prescriptive rule were indeed ungrammatical. Zwicky mailed the colleague examples from his own writing that violated the rule. And the colleague simply claimed to be "inclined to think that he should just be more vigilant" (see <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/000030.html>).

It is as if people think the rules exist independently of us, like parking regulations, and have been put there by some dominating authority to ensure that we frequently deserve pain and punishment.

Ignorance

Perhaps the clearest case of prescriptivist bullies displaying ignorance of grammatical analysis is found in the case of the passive construction, which has been the subject of increasingly extreme don't-do-this warnings since the beginning of the 20th century (see Pullum 2014 for a full discussion).

Huge numbers of published allegations about use of the passive voice give examples that are not passive at all, in any sense that has ever been used. And what is perhaps worst is that even usage advisors themselves often can't identify a passive.

In 2003 the *BBC News Style Guide* said this (though this paragraph has disappeared from the current online version):

Compare these examples. The first is in the passive, the second active:

- There were riots in several towns in Northern England last night, in which police clashed with stone-throwing youths.
- Youths throwing stones clashed with police during riots in several towns in Northern England last night.

There are no passive clauses anywhere in either example.

A usage handbook for lawyers, *The Aspen Handbook for Legal Writers* by Deborah E. Bouchoux, says this:

Most sentences that include dangling modifiers are written in the passive voice. Changing to active voice corrects the dangling modifier because an actor or subject is identified in the phrase that begins the sentence.

Example:

When a boy, my father changed careers (passive voice).

When I was a boy, my father changed careers (active voice, actor identified in modifying phrase).

There are no passive clauses here either.

The *Canadian Press Stylebook* (standard usage guide for working journalists in Canada) says this under "Common faults":

Active vs. passive

Think of active verbs as power words — words that drive your sentences, keep the reader's attention and move her briskly along.

Not: The economy experienced a quick revival.

But: The economy revived quickly.

Not: At first light there was no sign of the ship.

But: The ship vanished in the night.

The first supposedly bad example is in fact the opposite of a passive: it is an active transitive. The second is an active existential clause with a preposed locative adjunct.

I could go on: Pullum (2014) lists more than two dozen published cases of false allegations of passive voice. And they tell us something: people **don't seem to care** whether the allegations have any justification or whether the examples illustrate the point. The point is not to diagnose or even recognize genuinely instances of grammatically passive constructions, but to single people out for punishment.

Being in the passive voice is not a defined property of sentences for the usage critics; it is an allegation that can be used to justify submitting people to humiliation and pain.

Ancient lore and mendacious ghosts

There is a different kind of evidence that people long to be treated badly for their grammatical habits. We do not tolerate totally out-of-date instruction manuals on most aspects of our lives — in medicine, for example, it would be very unwise as well to use leeches and mercury in preference to visiting a general practitioner. So why do any of us accept the authority of style guides older than our grandparents? Fowler's classic *Modern English Usage* (1926) is now 90 years old; and the Fowler brothers' *The King's English* is 110. Why are they still treated as canonical works?

The reason, I suggest, is that people simply don't care how out of date the source is, because punishment from their elders and betters is what they unconsciously seek. And the older those elders the better!

William Strunk and E.B. White's toxic little compendium of bad grammatical advice, *The Elements of Style*, is still available in many versions, the most recent to my knowledge being a special re-release dated 2009. It was recently found to be required in more syllabi in American colleges and universities than any other book, besting even Plato's *Republic* and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*.

Strunk's little book is much more popular in the USA than here. I would love to be able to simply ignore it. But it now threatens to stalk us even here in the UK. *Gwynne's Grammar* (2011) is made up out of roughly 40 pages of front matter and pothering opinionated introduction (20%), 40 pages of appendices, glossary, and indexing (20%), 67 pages of old-fashioned grammar broadly plagiarised from 18th-century authorities like Lindley Murray (33%), and 53 other pages (27%) that contain nothing but a reproduction of Strunk's public-domain 1918 text of *The Elements of Style*. Strunk's ghost walks among us dressed as Nevile Gwynne.

It is worth keeping in mind that Strunk was born in 1869. It was not possible to cross the USA by rail; the Suez Canal did not exist; nor did the Brooklyn Bridge; the Cutty Sark had not yet been built. Strunk was older than Vladimir Lenin. When Strunk was born, General Custer still had several more years of successful military service ahead of him before his last stand at the Little Big Horn. Even if scrupulously accurate in its portrayal of good English grammar and style, Strunk's little book would be presenting the language as it was in the 19th century.

But in fact it gives bad and outdated grammar advice throughout, even if we are considering the English of the late 1800s.

White too was a man of the 19th century (born 1899). His learning of English was complete years before the Archduke Ferdinand was shot in Sarajevo. The age of White's 1959 revision of Strunk's book, however, is not its main problem. The main problem is that White's revision of his revered former professor's little book only made it worse. The style recommendations in the Chapter 5 that he added are vapid and tone-deaf; and his interpolated grammar and usage comments are uninformed, often ridiculous, and occasionally actually dishonest.

The key example of White's dishonesty is that he added to Strunk's booklet the fictive rule saying that a restricting relative clause must never begin with *which*, and then when he (or perhaps his editor) noticed that Strunk had neither mentioned this rule nor respected it, he went back through Strunk's text silently altering each restrictive *which* to *that* in the revised 1959 edition! (Jan Freeman of the *Boston Globe* discovered this: see Freeman 2005.) But let me mention two other such cases in more detail.

Modal *hopefully*

Neither Strunk in 1918 nor White in 1959 had mentioned the modal adjunct use of the adverb *hopefully*. But by 1966, Follett in his *Modern English Usage* had made this baseless remark about it:

Such a *hopefully* is un-English and eccentric; *it is to be hoped* is the natural way to express what is meant...

The special badness of *hopefully* is not alone that it strains the sense of to the breaking point, but that it appeals to speakers and writers who do not think about what they are saying and pick up VOGUE WORDS by reflex action. This peculiar charm of *hopefully* accounts for its tiresome frequency. How readily the rotten apple will corrupt the barrel is seen in the similar use of transferred meaning in other adverbs denoting an attitude of mind [such as *sorrowfully* and *thankfully*]. Adverbs so used lack point of view; they fail to tell us who does the hoping, the sorrowing, or the being thankful.

So, apparently taking his cue from Follett, White added to the 1972 edition of *The Elements of Style* this astonishing paragraph of directionless flailing:

Hopefully. This once-useful adverb meaning "with hope" has been distorted and is now widely used to mean "I hope" or "it is to be hoped." Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, "Hopefully I'll leave on the noon plane" is nonsense. Do you mean you'll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you'll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven't said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.

What is it that White thinks is wrong with modal adjunct uses? He calls them distorted, wrong, silly, nonsense, new, free-floating, pleasurable, offensive to the ear, dulling, erosive,

ambiguous, soft...and then, as if he had run out of epithets and had to return to a previously used one and call it nonsense again. It is remarkable that White's reputation as a good writer has survived this wild, flailing, indecisive paragraph.

Split infinitives

As a third example, consider the infamous split infinitive. Strunk never mentioned split infinitives in 1918, but the little-known first trade edition of his book in 1920 did say this much:

There is precedent from the fourteenth century downward for interposing an adverb between *to* and the infinitive which it governs, but the construction is in disfavor and is avoided by nearly all careful writers.

The latter claim is not true: the split infinitive was not "in disfavor" in 1920. But White keeps the reference to split infinitives, saying they "should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb," which is another mistake (to stress the adverb it is much better to have it postverbal, at the end of the VP).

Later he calls the construction a "violation," though "harmless and scarcely perceptible", and the alternative "stiff, needlessly formal." And this is wrong too: there is nothing very informal about split infinitives.

But guilt and self-flagellation about them continues down the years. We are advised to be oh-so-careful about using them, even though in some cases we are forced to. Consider, for example, this statement by T.E. Berry in *The Most Common Mistakes in English Usage* (1961):

Although some authorities approve of split infinitives, careful usage demands that splitting be avoided unless a strange or clumsy construction results.

Sometimes an infinitive simply must be split to gain the meaning intended. Note the following:

- *Visitors are asked to please park their cars away from the main building.*

In the sentence above, the word "please" must be placed within the infinitive so that it may modify the whole idea of being kind enough to park the cars away from the main building. Hence, in such an instance, the infinitive must be split.

Other guides advise us to avoid them even though they admittedly occur in uncontroversially famous prose:

split infinitives avoid, except in famous quotes such as "to boldly go where no man..." or in such limited emphatic constructions as "I want to live—to *really* live!"

[*The Times Guide to English Style and Usage* by Simon Jenkins (1992)]

Elsewhere we are advised to avoid them simply because certain readers get irrationally irritated (again with an admission that splitting may be essentially unavoidable):

split infinitives are accepted by grammarians but irritate many readers. When a graceful alternative exists, avoid the construction: *to show the difference clearly* is better than *to clearly show the difference*. (Do not use the artificial *clearly to*

show the difference.) When the split is unavoidable, accept it: *He was obliged to more than double the price.*

[*The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (1999)]

And we are advised to avoid them simply because some readers get “a considerable feeling” that they are “wrong”.

... However, despite all this it must be said that there is still, rightly or wrongly, a considerable feeling among English speakers that a split infinitive is wrong. Sometimes it seems natural to do so but a decision to split an infinitive should never be taken lightly.

[Peter Harvey, *A Guide to English Language Usage* (Lavengro, Barcelona, 2011)]

A different argument is that we should avoid them simply because it is technically possible to do so: they can be avoided if one is prepared to abandon one’s whole plan for the structure of a sentence and rewrite it:

In nearly 30 years as a professional writer I have yet to find a context in which the splitting of an infinitive is necessary to avoid ambiguity or some other obstruction to proper sense.

[Simon Heffer, *Strictly English* (2011)]

Nevile Gwynne strongly recommends that we avoid them just in case anyone objects:

My strong recommendation is that infinitive-splitting should never be done, other than, possibly, as an obviously intended ‘special effect’... After all, no one will object to the absence of split infinitives in your writing as long as you are careful to avoid awkwardness of any kind; whereas there will always be people who have read enough good literature of the past to find split infinitives inelegant, ugly or otherwise uncomfortable. There will therefore always be a possible cost without the prospect of any compensating gain.

[*Gwynne’s Grammar* by Nevile M. Gwynne (2011)]

And *The Economist* tells its writers to shun split infinitives even though it is “pointless”, simply because people might be annoyed:

Split infinitives

Happy the man who has never been told that it is wrong to split an infinitive: the ban is pointless. Unfortunately, to see it broken is so annoying to so many people that you should observe it.

[*The Economist Style Guide*, online]

Grotesque, horrible style in *The Economist* sometimes results from this ukase. Let me give three examples:

[*The Duma is*] *now considering a bill that would force any NGO receiving cash from abroad publicly to label itself a “foreign agent”*. [2012]

This is horrible style, wrongly tempting the reader to associate the underlined adverb with the wrong verb by reading *receiving cash from abroad publicly* as a unit (*publicly* is supposed to modify *label*).

The main umbrella organisation, the Syrian National Coalition, was supposed to do three things: expand its membership, elect a new leader and decide whether unconditionally to attend the Geneva talks. [2013]

I'm not even sure this is grammatical: the sequence '*whether* + Adverb + *to* + Verb' is certainly grossly unnatural, if permissible at all.

That is not, however, what the agreement says. Rather, it says that importing countries will lose the right automatically to treat China as a nonmarket economy for anti-dumping purposes. [2016]

If I have understood the article's argument correctly, *automatically* is intended as a modifier of *treat China as a nonmarket economy*, but positioned where it is it would be more naturally parsed as a modifier of *lose the right*. The unclarity has been deliberately introduced by the self-punishing insistence on avoiding split infinitives by mechanical leftward shifting of an adverb.

Whom

Yet one more famous Standard English shibboleth involves the accusative-case pronoun form *whom*. What is the value of stressing that people ought to use *whom* rather than *who* in non-subject environments?

Almost no ordinary person truly cares. No interview panel would base a rejection of a qualified a candidate on the fact that she said *Who would I contact about that?* or claimed that *Who they blamed is not important*.

In fact the main effect of using a clause-initial *whom* would have would be to sound stuffy and unapproachable.

It would be almost as bad as refusing to use negative auxiliary verbs in , which tends to make you sound like a foreigner or a robot.

The frequency of *whom* in clause-initial position has in fact fallen to zero among Standard English speakers, not just in conversation but generally. I cannot find a single example of clause-initial *Whom* in any of the email I have received at the University of Edinburgh since 2007.

Telling learners of English that they should say *Whom did you see in the park?* or *I didn't know whom to ask* is simply unethical. We should be teaching them to use the language the way native speakers use it.

The standard story is in any case not even clearly true. Notice the contrast between these examples (from recent well-edited press articles):

- (13) a. *Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, whom everyone assumes will be running for president in 2016, has had a lot of ups and downs in his relatively short*

career. [Prospect, 9 April 2013]

- b. *And he was asked about the woman who everyone assumes will be the Democratic nominee in 2016 – former secretary of state Hillary Clinton.*
[Washington Post, 11 May 2014]

The key question that has been missed is: subject of what? In the above cases the *wh*-word is not the subject of the relative clause, but it is the subject of the clause in which its gap is located. The bracketed structure is like this:

who(m) [_{Clause} \square *everyone assumes* [_{Clause} *will be ...*]]

In once sense *who* is a subject and in the other it is not. There are also cases in which a derivative of *who*, namely *whoever*, is in a sense both a subject and a nonsubject:

We can leave this to who(m)ever cares about it.

Which is correct? We need *whomever cares about it* (accusative) as the object of *to*, but we need *whoever* (nominative) as the subject of *cares*!

My belief is that the correct grammar of English does not settle this. We face what I call a **syntactic quandary**. Speakers are undecided precisely because the grammar of their language happens not to settle this matter at all. There is nothing to berate anyone about, for either usage.

Naturally, that will not appeal to the masochists: they want to find out who's wrong and submit them to punishment. To say that the rules of grammar for English do not determine an answer is like telling flagellation enthusiasts that using whips is wrong because one should be kind and merciful. For them, that would be missing the whole point.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that the prescriptive rules defended in the most conservative usage books (though not in nearly as many as some people seem to think) are not just misguided but psychologically harmful. They are generally offered without a hint of warrant or justification, and are often way past their use-by dates—by a century or so.

The crucial point is that there is **no point** in people obeying these fictive rules: neither their writing nor their lives will be thereby improved.

The only explanation for the willingness of the public to accede to such rules and acknowledge their supposed grammatical misdeeds is that they **want** judgment and punishment.

And we know what negativity and punishment tend to do to the development of the young: self-esteem and self-confidence are harmed. People who believe in the existence of important rules of the grammar of their language that they don't command tend to develop what I have called **nervous cluelessness**: they don't know what it is exactly that is wrong, but they feel nervous when using a pronoun or a preposition or an occurrence of the verb *be*.

The question arises is how we can help people to recover from their perverted lust for punishment and start living as normal healthy adults. I really only have one proposal about what we usage-advice professionals and grammar-studying academics can do, and it is not likely to find favour with the publishers of usage guides: we can stop telling the public about these supposed rules.

That means no usage manual entries on modal adjunct *hopefully*, split infinitives, genitive antecedents for pronouns, singular antecedents for *they*, genitive case marking for subjects of gerund-participles, stranded prepositions (“preposition at end”), sentence-initial coordinators, and so on. Just leave those topics out of usage handbooks, the way we now leave Noah and his actions after the flood out of palaeontology textbooks. (And of course don’t show this chapter to anyone outside the ranks of qualified language professionals.)

I say this because there is evidence that the moment people hear about a new alleged rule, no matter what the attendant softenings and qualifications might be, they want to stiffen it and simplify it and then clutch it to their bosoms and flagellate themselves for not obeying it.

And of course they also long to flog other people for allegedly violating it. Each fictive rule of grammar offers them one more scourge to use. In my view, we writers on usage have a duty to cease facilitating such sad perversions of the noble purpose of helping others to write more expertly.

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